The Popular Mind in Eighteenth-Century Ireland

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IN MEMORIAM

of Christ. The poet's qualification of love with the epithets *coitcheann*/universal and *gan chlaochlódh*/unchanging once more brings us back to Platonic thought, the Ideas or Forms that exist in the intelligible world, but located in the mind of God according to Augustine's Christian interpretation. Individual human acts of love are such because they participate in the Idea of Love that is Christ. The apparent simplicity of this extra verse belies its philosophical complexity. Not only does it provide a closure to the particular poem, but also to the booklet as a whole. Composed for the instruction of prospective novices to the Irish Franciscans in Louvain, it ends on a note of hope. One can emerge from the delusions of the dark cave and ascend towards the light. The whole object of Franciscan life is to facilitate this encounter with the divine light of eternal truth and perfect love.

Ailbhe Ó Corráin is to be congratulated on demonstrating the prevalence of Platonic thought and imagery in Bonabhentura Ó hEódhasa's poetry and situating it in the context of the Renaissance, Reformation and Counter-Reformation. While the poet's preoccupation with free will reflects the Counter-Reformation response to the Reformers who asserted that human volition lacked the capacity to choose between good and evil, this aspect of Ó hEódhasa's thought derives from the time he spent studying in Douai and Louvain. It is also possible that the poet had already become exposed to other aspects of Platonic thought before he left Ireland through his contacts with the Nugent literary circle. Distinguishing between these two strands could indeed provide a profitable field of research. The time is now ripe to undertake a thorough study of Ó hEódhasa's work. Ailbhe Ó Corráin is eminently qualified to undertake this task.

MÍCHEÁL MAC CRAITH OFM
Dún Mhuire, Cill Inion Léinín, Co. Bhaile Átha Cliath

The popular mind in eighteenth-century Ireland. Vincent Morley. Cork University Press. Cork 2017. ix + 362 pp.

This is a pioneering and important book that shines much light on historical Irish-language sources, both in manuscript and print form. Few scholars have the requisite combination of historiographical skill and knowledge of the late manuscript tradition that is required to produce such an exhaustive and authoritative work. As it is situated on the common ground shared by history and literature, it will potentially be

of great value to scholars from both fields, and should be read by anyone who is undertaking serious study of eighteenth-century Ireland.

The author sets out his stall in the introduction, summarising the historiography of the Gaelic Irish eighteenth century, and explaining how his own thesis proposes to challenge much of what has been written in this area. As in some of Morley's previous publications, such as the recent *Ó Chéitinn go Raiftearaí: mar a cumadh stair na hÉireann* (2012), the broad thrust of the argument in this book is that that the common Gaelic Irish had clearly developed a sophisticated and dynamic popular political consciousness by the eighteenth century. As the author states, the view '... that the populace was not politicised before the late eighteenth, or even the nineteenth century ... cannot survive any familiarity with Irish literature'. It stands to reason, of course, that evidence of this 'popular mind' is best found in the Irish literature of the time, and Morley's background as both an editor of eighteenth-century poetry and an historian of popular culture makes him especially qualified to analyse this crucially important body of texts.

Indeed, the structure of the book itself is established on the sound premise that primary source materials in Irish offer the most valuable insights on the popular *mentalité* of the country: Morley has presented and translated eight poems that illustrate contemporary thought on political issues, and the choice of these particular texts is most original. Few outside of Irish literary scholarship will know these poems, and it is doubtful even that many initiated literary scholars will be familiar with the likes of *Staid nua na hÉireann, 1697*, 'Ireland's new condition, 1697' by Seán Ó Gadhra (1649–*c*.1720) or the anonymous *Cé fada dúinn fá dhaoirse gan aoibhneas an tséinghin*, 'Though we've long been in bondage, without the comfort of the well born'. This last poem was edited from manuscript, and the author shows a most impressive knowledge of the manuscript culture of the era throughout the book, giving pertinent information on the geographical extent of each poem's distribution, and highlighting differences in the poems' composition across the manuscript witnesses (139, 179–80, 233 etc.). It should also be noted that the translations of the texts themselves are rendered in a clear style that will accommodate scholarly enquiry from non-Irish speakers, and the notes provided at the bottom of each page are most useful.

Each text is followed by discussion that focuses on particular strands of the contemporary political awareness. The breadth of sources used here is impressive: they range from canonical Irish texts such as Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill's *Mo ghiolla mear* to fairly obscure poems by Seon Ó hUaithnín

(1688–?) and Aodh Mac Dónaill (*fl.* 1840), from Scottish Gaelic poems by Donnchadh Bán Mac an t-Saoir (1724–1813) and Alasdair Mac Fhionghain (*fl.* 1799) to John Lynch's Hiberno-Latin *Cambrensis Eversus* (1666) and seldom-used English language documents such as Henry Jones' *A Remonstrance of Divers Remarkeable Passages Concerning the Church and Kingdome of Ireland* (1642). Given that many eighteenth-century Irish poems have not been published in printed form, any serious enquiry into the 'popular mind' of the time requires frequent recourse to manuscript sources, and, as with the eight translated poems, Morley's remarkable knowledge of the contemporary manuscript tradition is evident throughout the book.

The first of the texts selected is *Tuireamh Shomhairle Mhic Dónaill*, a lament composed by Séamus Dall Mac Cuarta of Omeath, Co. Louth (*fl.* 1700) for Somhairle Mac Dónaill who fell at the Battle of the Boyne (1690), and the discussion that follows it deals with the common Irish perception of the Tripartite Stuart Monarchy and the Jacobite cause. Through using Irish, English and Latin sources, the author traces the changing relationship between the Irish people, the Jacobites and established monarchy. The second text, *Staid nua na hÉireann, 1697*, 'The new state of Ireland' by Seán Ó Gadhra (1649–*c.*1720) is essentially a lament, bemoaning the hardships suffered by Ireland over the ages, but focusing primarily on the seventeenth century. Poems of this kind such as *Tuireamh na hÉireann*, 'The lament for Ireland' and *An síogaí rómhánach*, 'The Roman sprite' were common around this time, and *Staid nua na hÉireann* is particularly interesting in that its author stemmed from the old Gaelic ruling family of O'Gara. The author's privileged background may be discerned in lines such as *Gan choin gan each gan scaith an éadaigh / ach dailtíní smearthaí á réabadh*, 'Without hound or horse or fine clothing, but being torn apart by greasy upstarts' (63, ll 13–14) and *Níl cead ag neach a dhul as talamh na hÉireann, / ach mar urraim, go gcuirfeam an chléir as; / dá riar bí an triath agus an tréigtheach, / sliocht Lóbuis 's a mhór-fhuil ar aon scor*, 'Nobody is allowed to leave the land of Ireland except that, as a mark of respect, we'll expel the clergy, they are served by deserters and lords,[1] Lóbus's descendants (i.e. peasants) and nobility are on a par (64, ll 33–6)'.

[1] My translation here differs slightly from Morley's in my interpretation of *dá riar* as referring to the clergy 'being served', i.e. that peasants and nobles both are now providing for the church, where once this was the preserve of the ruling families. Morley's translation of this line is 'the lord and the deserter are being dealt with'. The *bí* in this line likely indicates the flexionless independent present form of the verb.

A Bhanba is feasach dom do scéala, 'O Banba, I am familiar with your tidings' (96–105) also gives an account of the calamities suffered by Ireland, and reveals the poet Aodh Buí Mac Cruitín's (*c.*1680–1755) understanding of the wider context of Irish historiography, comparing Irish sources to stories from Classical antiquity (98–9, ll 48–72). This poem fits loosely into the *Aisling*, 'Vision' genre of political poetry, or at least into the type that Breandán Ó Doibhlin has called *An Aisling Náisiúnta*, 'The National Vision Poem'[2] in that the poet addresses Ireland personified as *Banba*, but does not allude, as many of these texts do, to a saviour who will banish the foreigners. Instead, the poet refers in the final line to *éiric*, 'retribution': the implication here is perhaps that the time for displacing the foreign regime has passed. Those who are familiar with *Five seventeenth-century political poems* and other historical/political poems of the time will recognize much of the content of this text, and the author acknowledges that an 'orthodox narrative of Irish history had been formulated and accepted by the middle of the eighteenth century at the latest (115)'. In the important chapter entitled 'Memory' the author identifies the six historical episodes that define this orthodoxy as *St Patrick and the Island of Saints, Brian Bóruma and the Norse, The English Invasion, The Reformation and Henry the VIII, Cromwell* and *Eoghan Rua Ó Néill*. Morley's awareness of regional variation is evident in his statement that '... Brian Bóruma received less attention in the north than in Munster. It is significant that *Cath Chluana Tarbh* and the *Leabhar Oiris*, southern texts in which Brian was extolled, would not appear to have been copied by northern scribes (123–4).

The same statement might have been made in reverse about Eoghan Rua Ó Néill (*c.*1585–1649), who was much vaunted by the northern literati, but relatively ignored by the southern poets. Indeed, more might have been said of Eoghan Rua and Cromwell, but the description provided here does offer keen observations on the nature of historical memory, one of which being that the use of the present tense in the line *gur cuireadh le Cromail na pobail fé riail mar táid*, '...until Cromwell placed the people in subjection as they are' shows that Cromwell was still blamed in the nineteenth century for the plight of Ireland (137).

Text 4 *Cá raibh tú le bliain?*, 'Where have you been for a year?' by Peadar Ó Doirnín of Louth (*c.*1700–69) is a description of some of the events of the War of Austrian Succession as told by a returning Irish participant who revels in various British defeats. The discourse that

[2] *Manuail de litríocht na Gaeilge, Faisicil V 1704–1750: an dubhaois* (Baile Átha Cliath 2009) 62–3.

follows this poem is more general in focus, and deals with Irish perceptions of wars outside the country. This discussion begins with a succinct and useful résumé of Irish involvement in European armies, and continues to trace the emergence of the term *géanna fiáine*, 'wild geese', outline the involvement of various old Irish ruling families in these conflicts, and discuss the reaction of Irish literati to specific events in the wars. In this part of the book, the author makes several telling observations in passing that are worth highlighting: for instance, in commenting on passages from poems by Aodh Buí Mac Cruitín (*c.*1680–1755) and Diarmaid mac Sheáin Bhuí Mac Cárthaigh (*c.*1632–1755) he notes 'The two laments quoted above have an aristocratic tone, as would be expected given their early dates of composition … (151)'. Morley goes on to acknowledge that other factors may have been at play than the earliness of these texts' composition (*c.*1694), but the idea that there is correlation between the period of a texts' composition and its outlook on the old Gaelic nobility is surely a prime topic for a separate and more sustained enquiry.

Chapters four and five show us how well-versed the native Irish were in international affairs. It is clear from the texts that precede these chapters – and the ample references in the discussions themselves – that the native Irish keenly monitored the events of the European and American wars though, until the late eighteenth century at least, the poets seemed to be mostly interested in British defeats. Animosity for the British settlers – those from the Cromwellian and Williamite eras in any case – continued well into the eighteenth century, and chapter six describes the agrarian basis of this continuing resentment.

The poem presented at the beginning of this chapter, *Cé fada dúinn fá dhaoirse gan aoibhneas an tséinghin*, 'Though we've been long in bondage, without the comfort of the well born' celebrates some of the leaders of the agrarian movement, and reveals an emerging anticlerical sentiment (202–5). This disdain for clergy proved less venomous, however, than the derision that the native Irish held for the lowborn late settlers. Evidence of this is presented in the excerpt given from Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin (216–17) and in those texts on the preceding pages. The lists of the new settlers' 'outlandish surnames' in these poems highlight the linguistic discordance between the Gaels and the late settlers, and give us an insight into the genuine distaste that the former had for the English language, describing it as *géimneach* 'lowing' and *méileach* 'bleating'. The English speakers are derisively described as *búir* 'boors', *poll dubh* 'black [arse]hole', and *ardbhodach* 'loutish big-shot'. This last term[3] is culturally significant in seventeenth- and

[3] < O.Ir. *botach* 'serf; rustic, peasant' http://dil.ie/6431.

eighteenth-century literature, where the term *bodaigh an Bhéarla*, 'English-speaking louts' gained popular currency, and a new shade of meaning became attached to *bodach*, denoting a cultural deficiency independent of class or wealth. This term, and the references to *géimneach* or *méileach* express a feeling of cultural superiority, even a condescension, that was felt by the Gaels towards those outside the Gaelic cultural ambit. The discussion Morley provides on the semantic evolution of such key cultural/historical terms in Irish is one of the high points of the book. Another analysis of this kind is focused on the evolution of the term *Breatain* 'Britain'. Although this remains a vexed matter in contemporary society, Morley is unequivocal in his conclusion regarding the accepted meaning of the term amongst the Gaelic Irish by the time of the Act of Union:

> For the Irish-speaking population, both *'Alba'* (Scotland) and *'Sasana'* (England) were familiar and well-defined entities, for good or ill, but *'Breatain'*, remained a nebulous and indistinct concept. In 1801, the modern usage was not yet securely established and the term had no resonance in the popular mind. (287)

Terms like *Breatain*, and indeed the literature in which they are found, offer insights *ab intra* into the Gaelic mind that can only be wholly gained through thorough analysis of the primary texts in the Irish language.

This scorn for the English language and their absension from British political consciousness does not indicate that the Gaelic Irish were particularly insular in their world view. Rather it points to a facet of the emerging dissident egalitarian attitude in the wider western world that found expression in the American and French revolutions and in the 1798 rebellion in Ireland. One particular vignette given at the end of chapter 6 offers a fascinating insight into the native Irish engagement of this kind with international politics: 'In 1787 an alarmed … member of parliament claimed during a parliamentary debate that a body of Rightboys had paraded behind the Stars and Stripes, "the intention of which of which need not be explained to the Members of the House"' (232). Morley rightly acknowledges elsewhere that 'Protestant paranoia' may have played a part in exaggerating instances such as this. More solid evidence of Irish engagement with contemporary Western political thought can be found in the primary Gaelic sources.

One such source is the poem *Táid maithe na Breataine in anbhroid péine*, 'The worthies of Britain are in dire distress', which is given at

the beginning of chapter 7. This poem was composed in 1795, and its author, Finín Ó Scannail, shows a familiarity with and sympathy towards the French Revolutionary Wars and the republican cause. As with other parts of the book, the discussion in this chapter advocates that the political agency of the Gaelic Irish peasant should be given more attention. The author points out that the rank and file of the armies in 1798 were rural Irish, rather than 'middle-class political activists in Dublin and Belfast' (242). Unlike previous conflicts with the English establishment in Ireland, a significant number of Presbyterians participated in the United Irishmen movement, but Presbyterian involvement did not bring about a significant shift in popular Irish political thought. As Morley states, 'as far as the Irish Catholic masses were concerned, their embrace of republicanism involved little more than a change of political nomenclature' (243).

It is shown that many of the Jacobite poets made an easy transition after 1788 to Republicanism. In 1785, Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin (1766–1837) foresaw the coming of Charles Edward Stuart travelling over the waves to Ireland with a powerful army (248), but by 1797 he began to espouse a distinctly republican philosophy:

> … is ea chumas an tamhrán beag so thíos, do ghríosú bhfear nÉireann de gach aon chreideamh agus go háirithe clanna Gael fána mbeith díleas dea-rúin deiscréideach i gcomhcheangal grá páirte cumainn agus lánmhuintearais i ngrá dearbhráithreachais le chéile, ionas go mb'fhusaide dhóibh an cluiche seo do bhreith agus iad féin do shaoradh ón ndaorchuing sclábhaíochta féna bhfuilid le cian d'aimsir faraoir!
>
> (… I composed this short song below, to urge the men of Ireland of all religions, and especially the Gaels, to be loyal, benevolent and discreet in a loving, warm, affectionate and fully amicable compact in fraternal attachment towards one another, so that it would be easier for them to win this contest and to free themselves from the cruel yoke of slavery under which they have been for so long, alas!) (259–60)

After the defeat of the United Irishmen in 1798, the Gaelic Irish found a new vehicle for their aspirations in Napoleon Bonaparte, who assumed the same role of prophesied saviour that was once occupied by successive Stuart royals in the political poetry. As with the switch from Jacobitism to Republicanism, the subsequent transfer of political

aspirations to *Bóna* was a smooth one. The reason for this seems to be that native Irish disaffection remained focused on a few core issues that could feasibly be addressed by either the Stuarts, the French Republicans, or Napoleon in turn. Morley identifies these constant concerns as '… hatred of the reigning monarch and of England; hatred of the established church and the Anglo-Irish asendancy; anticipation of a French invasion – irrespective of whether France was ruled by a Bourbon monarch, by Republicans, or by the emperor of the French – and the liberation of Ireland from English and Protestant rule …' (278).

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo (1815), the hope of a French invasion diminished, and various home-grown messianic candidates emerged. The most famous of these was Daniel O'Connell, the 'liberator' and leader of the repeal movement; others included John Burke, whose victory in the general election of 1830 is celebrated in *Election na Gaillimhe,* 'The Galway Election', the text preceding the final chapter. Though there are many references to contemporary events in this text, its general tenor and much of its subject matter might have been taken from any number of political poems from the 1640–1840 period. Perennial antagonists Diarmaid Mac Murchadha, Cromwell and Henry Tudor are cast once more in this poem as villains of the piece, and the author calls upon all Gaels to find common cause (272–7). Prophecy is not mentioned in *Election na Gaillimhe* itself, but the supposed prediction of *Pastorini* (i.e. Charles Walmsley, 1722–97) that Protestantism would collapse in 1825 is mentioned in at least three other texts of this period.

This, indeed, is the main argument that emerges by the end of the book: the popular Irish political poetry, and the popular Irish political mind cleaved to the same major concerns across the late seventeenth century, through the eighteen-hundreds and well into the nineteenth century. To those who understand the Irish language and are familiar with its historical literature, this continuity may have been something that has been taken for granted. Morley has articulated this concept most adroitly in the present work, and provided scholars of Irish literature with what will undoubtedly prove to be a key text in the field. *The popular mind in eighteenth-century Ireland* may also remind those who disregard the Irish language of how much can be gained from these sources.

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